

What is Organization Theory?

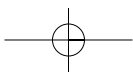
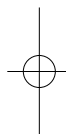
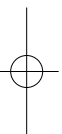
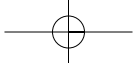
theorist /'θiərɪst/ *n.* a holder or inventor of a theory or theories.

theorize /'θiərəɪz/ *v. intr.* (also **-ise**) evolve or indulge in theories.

theorizer *n.*

theory /'θiəri/ *n.* (*pl. -ies*) **1** a supposition or system of ideas explaining something, esp. one based on general principles independent of the particular things to be explained (opp. HYPOTHESIS) (*atomic theory; theory of evolution*). **2** a speculative (esp. fanciful) view (*one of my pet theories*). **3** the sphere of abstract knowledge or speculative thought (*this is all very well in theory, but how will it work in practice?*). **4** the exposition of the principles of a science etc. (*the theory of music*). **5** *Math.* a collection of propositions to illustrate the principles of a subject (*probability theory; theory of equations*). [LL *theoria* f. Gk *theōria* f. *theōros* spectator f. *theōreō* look at]

Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary



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Why Study Organization Theory?

Organization theory is not an easy sell. Unless you are naturally drawn to the abstract, you probably expect this subject to be dry, unconnected to practical matters and perhaps a little boring. Even if you are enthusiastic about abstractions, it can be daunting to confront as many of them at one time as organization theory asks you to do. So why would anyone sign up to study this complex and difficult subject matter?

There are many different answers to this question. For some, studying organization theory is motivated by curiosity. They wonder what it would be like to think like an organization, to get inside organizing processes far enough to reveal the intricate organizational patterns that make organizations understandable. Others are motivated by the attraction of stretching their minds in new ways. For example, organization theory draws on the sciences, the humanities and the arts, and so presents the intellectual challenge of thinking in interdisciplinary ways. Some turn to organization theory in the hope that it will improve their chances of becoming successful executives in business, government or non-profit organizations. Table 1.1 lists some of their specific reasons. For me, it was something else entirely. I came to organization theory reluctantly when it was foisted upon me as a requirement of my doctoral program. To say that I did not appreciate organization theory when I first encountered it would be putting it mildly.

In a way, my initial disaffection with organization theory inspired this book. Once I began using organization theory, my experiences convinced me that this field of study is not only valuable—it is interesting! Organization theory has helped me time and again to analyze complicated situations in the organizations with which I have worked, and to discover or invent effective and creative means for dealing with them. It has opened my mind to many aspects of life both inside and outside organizations that I previously took for granted, and it has given me both mental discipline and a wide-ranging knowledge of many different subjects. My amazement at how relevant and valuable organization theory can be caused me to reverse my initially low opinion of the field and find great enthusiasm for it. It is this change in my perception that led me to write this book. Through it I hope to share my insights and enthusiasm with you as you discover the benefits and attractions of organization theory for yourself.

Whether you come to organization theory out of curiosity, a desire to improve your chances of success in life, or simply because somebody made you do it, there are three inter-related things I can tell you that will ease your way into this complex subject. The first involves theories and theorizing, the second concerns abstraction and its place in theory development, and the third explains why you need to study organizations from multiple perspectives. I will introduce you to each of these topics in the following sections of this chapter.

Table 1.1 Some applications of organization theory

Strategy/Finance	Those who want to improve the value of a company need to know how to organize to achieve organizational goals; those who want to monitor and control performance will need to understand how to achieve results by structuring activities and designing organizational processes.
Marketing	Marketers know that to create a successful corporate brand they need to get the organization behind the delivery of its promise; a thorough understanding of what an organization is and how it operates will make their endeavors to align the organization and its brand strategy more feasible and productive.
Information technology	The way information flows through the organization affects work processes and outcomes, so knowing organization theory can help IT specialists identify, understand and serve the organization's informational needs as they design and promote the use of their information systems.
Operations	Value chain management has created a need for operations managers to interconnect their organizing processes with those of suppliers, distributors and customers; organization theory not only supports the technical aspects of operations and systems integration, but explains their socio-cultural aspects as well.
Human resources	Nearly everything HR specialists do from recruiting to compensation has organizational ramifications and hence benefits from knowledge provided by organization theory; organizational development and change are particularly important elements of HR that demand deep knowledge of organizations and organizing, and organization theory can provide content for executive training programs.
Communication	Corporate communication specialists must understand the interpretive processes of organizational stakeholders and need to address the many ways in which different parts of the organization interact with each other and the environment, in order to design communication systems that are effective or to diagnose ways existing systems are misaligned with the organization's needs.

Theories and Theorizing Organizations

You might be surprised to learn that you use theory everyday, and so does everyone else. Take for example any old adage that seems true or wise to you. One of my favorites is 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.' Old sayings like this one are filled with common sense (e.g., about what you can and cannot do for others) and common sense is a theory about how to understand and negotiate life. More generally, whenever you create your own meaning or grasp someone else's, you make things, feelings, ideas, experiences, values and expectations into ideas or concepts. In doing this you explain yourself and your world and this constitutes theorizing. Organization theorists specialize in developing this human capacity to make and use theory. They hone their theorizing skills by refining conceptual distinctions and using them to create sophisticated explanations

(theories) that far outstrip common sense. As they do so they participate in the invention of new ways of looking at experience and its phenomena. The basic difference between common sense theorizing and the theorizing academics do is the added care academics take to specify their practice, correct its errors and share their theories with others, thereby contributing to systematic knowledge-building efforts.

Theories are built from abstractions known as concepts. One concept—called the **phenomenon of interest**—is selected from all the others as a focus for theorizing and then related concepts are defined and used to explain that one. Consider Albert Einstein's theory that $E = mc^2$. Energy (E) was Einstein's phenomenon of interest and he explained it using the concepts of mass (m) and a constant representing the speed of light (c). The squaring of c, and its multiplication by m, specify how these explanatory concepts are related to the phenomenon of interest and form Einstein's theory about the relationship between energy and matter. In a nutshell, $E = mc^2$ shows what **theory** is—a set of concepts and the relationships between them proposed to explain the phenomenon of interest.

Sometimes the explanation of a phenomenon is too complex for precise specification using a mathematical formula. This is the usual case for phenomena involving human behavior because human behavior is notoriously unpredictable, except under tightly constrained conditions like those psychologists create in laboratories where the ordinary influences of everyday life can be controlled. For this reason explaining organizations where humans are at work often demands the use of statistical probabilities rather than precise formulae. Alternatively, researchers turn to metaphor or analogy to explain their phenomena. Sometimes theorists do not even attempt to explain phenomena; instead they develop understanding and appreciation or give practical guidance. You will meet all of these kinds of theorizing in the pages that follow as we wend our way from theories of organization that take physical science as their model, to those that find their foundations in the humanities and the arts.

Given the volume and variety of organization theories, you may find it somewhat ironic to call this field of study organization theory. While the name suggests that there is only one—a single, integrated, overarching explanation for organizations and organizing—in fact there are many organization theories and they do not always fit neatly together. Some people see this diversity as a stumbling block for an academic discipline because, in their view, if there is no agreement on what a field has to offer then it probably has little to offer at all. Others try to excuse the situation arguing that organization theory is a young field that will eventually work out its differences and come around to the singular perspective that they believe defines a mature academic discipline.

I take an altogether different view. Along with a number of other organization theorists, I believe that organization theory always has and always will embrace multiple perspectives because it draws inspiration from a wide variety of other fields of study, and because organizations will remain too complex and malleable to ever be summed up by any single theory. In my view the diverse theoretical base of organization theory is something to celebrate, not only because it offers a broad perspective on organizational life that encompasses scientific explanation, human understanding and artful appreciation, but because it creates more possibilities for effectively designing and managing organizations.

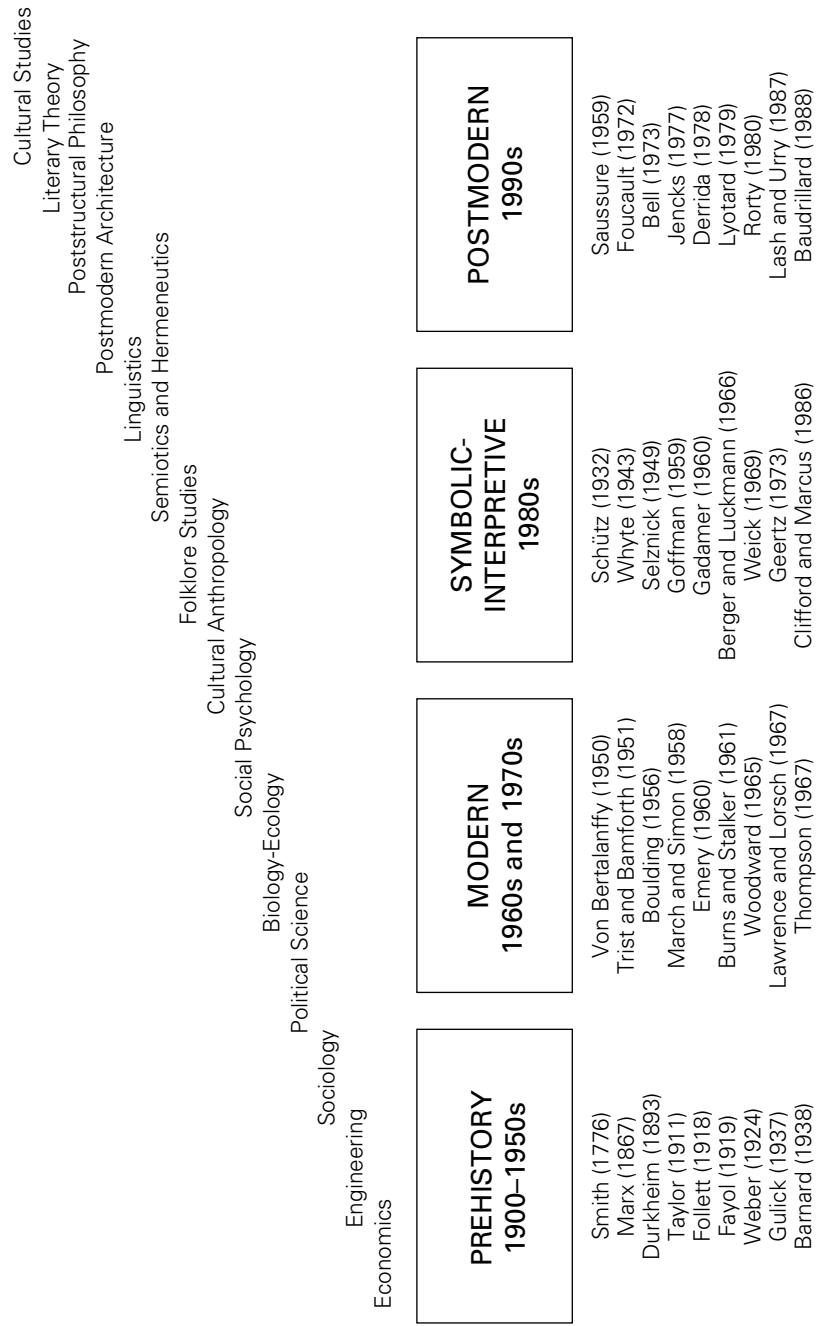


Figure 1.1 Sources of inspiration for organization theory

The boxes show the four major perspectives on organizations used as a framework for this book. The dates inside the boxes indicate the decade when the perspective became recognizable within the field. Contributing disciplines are indicated above the boxes and some of their influential thinkers are listed below. Notice that some contributions pre-date their influences on organization theory considerably, indicating the lag in communication between disciplines.

Figure 1.1 will give you appreciation for the ambitious reach of organization theory. The figure displays the many academic disciplines from which organization theorists have drawn inspiration. The top part of the figure shows the academic disciplines that have contributed to organization theory while the bottom part names some major thinkers from these disciplines whose ideas have shaped the field. Be sure to notice that the contributing disciplines range from the natural and social sciences to the humanities and arts.

Now look at the middle part of Figure 1.1. The first box, labeled prehistory, represents sources of ideas about organizations that occurred before anyone considered organization theory to be a discipline in its own right. Thus the authors listed below the prehistory box did not theorize organization from a single perspective nor did they intend to create the field of organization theory; they had their own disciplinary communities, shown at the top of the figure, to which they were oriented when they wrote. Nonetheless the authors grouped in the prehistory category provided organization theory with its formative concepts and their ideas served as reference points around which the perspectives of organization theory later developed. When you become familiar with these authors, you will hear echoes of their words in the many concepts and theories that make organization theory what it is today, and you will recognize how their work contributed to one or more of the three perspectives that form the remaining boxes in the middle of Figure 1.1.

The order of the boxes from left to right in the middle of this figure gives a sense of how the field has changed over time (don't panic, you will get more information about the multiple perspectives of organization theory in a minute). But it would be a mistake to think that newer perspectives have replaced older ones; perspectives accumulate in organization theory and over time they influence one another as organization theorists take in more and more of the ideas this field of study offers.

To get a grip on what I mean by perspectives, you may find it helpful to compare them to literary or film genres (e.g., drama, romantic comedy, horror), styles of painting (e.g., classical, impressionist, post-impressionist, cubist) or types of jazz (Big Band, Bebop, Cool Jazz, Fusion). Just as these genres encourage certain forms of artistic expression, theoretical perspectives encourage certain ways of thinking and speaking. And not unlike genre in the arts, it is only after the appearance of a critical mass of theories using similar underlying logics and vocabularies that anyone identifies them as having come from the same perspective and articulates what the assumptions underpinning that perspective are. Thelonious Monk, among others, was playing Bebop before anyone acknowledged this as a new type of jazz or gave it a name. Similarly Max Weber, Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx were writing about bureaucracy and authority before organization theory was known by this name. Thus, the different perspectives on organization theory developed at different times and continue to develop in reaction to one another. Today their proponents form communities within organization theory whose members think and do research in similar ways that you will soon learn to distinguish from one another.

Interplay among the perspectives of organization theory produces continuous change in each of them, which is one reason why it can be difficult to make a case for one particular way of sorting through the ideas of organization theory, including the one diagramed in Figure 1.1. However, if you are a newcomer to the field, you will probably appreciate a little order; most people find it useful to hear about how others have come to

terms with the diversity of organization theory. But please feel free to rearrange, change or even abandon any of the schemes presented throughout this book when you are ready to create your own. In Part III I will introduce you to the organization theorists who are currently challenging the dominant perspectives by inventing new concepts and theories. Eventually some of them will combine their work into new perspectives that will stand alongside those that provide the framework for this book. But before you are ready to tackle all these current issues in organization theory, you need to know something about what organization theory is and where it came from. Let me start you off with some basics concerning theory and theorizing.

Concepts and Abstraction in Theory Development

Concepts provide mental categories for sorting, organizing and storing experience in memory. They are ideas formed by the process of abstraction. Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines **abstraction** as the 'formation of an idea by mental separation from particular instances.' This means that you build concepts in your memory on the basis of your acquaintance with instances that are familiar to you, either as the result of personal experience, or based on what others tell you. For example, your concept of dog is built upon your personal encounters with representatives of this class of animal such as dogs you have owned or that have bitten you; upon stories you have heard others tell about their experiences with dogs; and upon encounters with non-dogs that, when you were a young child, helped you to build this concept by teaching you what a dog is not ('No, that's a cat').

Think of your concepts as empty baskets to be filled with experience. If you first encounter concepts through academic study, you will likely experience it as empty. This is one reason why organization theory appears to many as dry and boring when they first encounter it. To enrich your concepts you must fill them with meaning by relating personal experiences to them in much the same way you did when you learned the concept of dog as a young child. That is, you must gather specific examples that fit each concept until it is more or less fully formed. Of course you can continue enriching your concepts for the remainder of your life, like experts do. For example, a person who trains dogs learns more about them all the time, just as an organization theorist continually seeks different ways of understanding and explaining organizations. This means that, at least for experts, some concepts will be continually expanding. There is no end to the subtlety you can develop by enriching your concepts and, of course, by adding new concepts to your knowledge base. The trick is to get the process of abstraction going.

It is important to remember that, in this book, you will mostly encounter other peoples' concepts. Your task will be to relate these concepts to your own experience and other knowledge that you have stored in your memory. I will present the concepts of organization theory in ways designed to trigger associations with experiences you have had so that you can fill your concepts with your own meanings. With each new concept you encounter, try imagining what it is that you have personally experienced that might relate to it. Keep a journal of these ideas with different sections dedicated to describing the

examples you relate to each concept. Be playful. Do not feel constrained to obvious associations; also challenge yourself to consider experiences you only intuitively sense are applicable. As you do this you will begin to embed concepts in your own experience as well as placing your experience in the context of your conceptual knowledge. Comparing your examples to those of your classmates, colleagues, or others you know who are interested in organizations will also expand your understanding and hone your conceptual abilities.

As your pool of concepts and theories expands, you will find yourself analyzing your experiences in new ways, for instance, by relating experiences that you never before thought of as related, or by seeing hidden or disregarded aspects of a situation in which you were involved. In other words, use your personal experience to develop concepts with which you can understand or build theories, and then use your concepts and theories to better understand your experiences. This sort of give and take between theoretical understanding and personal experience is essential to the development of your theorizing skills of abstraction, reasoning and application as well as to your knowledge of organizations and organizing.

Although concepts are associated with specific examples, a concept is not a simple aggregation of all the information you remember about specific examples. A concept is much more compact than this. To form a concept, ignore the unique elements or features you associate with specific examples and focus on only those aspects that are common to all the instances to which the concept applies. Thus, the concept dog is associated with four legs, a tail, a cold wet nose when it is healthy, and two ears, but not black spots, big paws, or a habit of jumping on strangers, which are features of particular dogs, but not all dogs. Seen in these terms, abstraction is the process of removing the unique details of particular examples so that only their common aspects remain. Of course abstraction does not happen in one move; learning is involved in the movement from multiple concrete examples to an abstraction.

You may wonder why you would want to drop all the interesting details out of your daily experiences in order to build concepts. One reason is that abstraction gives you an increased ability to process more information and/or to process information more quickly. When you encounter a new example of a well-developed concept, you have numerous bits of information about that object or idea at your fingertips. If you recognize an object as a dog, you may instantly be aware of the possibility that it will growl if it feels threatened. This information has immediate practical value. Concepts also make it possible to communicate knowledge to others. For instance, once your children know what a dog is, you can tell them that some dogs bite and so they should not reach out their hands to a strange dog until they are confident it is friendly.

In addition to giving you the ability to communicate with others, abstraction gives you enormous powers of thought. It allows you to associate volumes of information with a single concept and thereby to process this information rapidly whenever you think of, or with, the concept. You can see the importance of this aspect of abstraction in terms of the psychological process known as **chunking**. Cognitive psychologists tell us that humans have the capacity to think about, roughly, seven pieces of information (plus or minus two) at one time.¹ This means that you can think about seven different dogs and nothing else, or, through chunking larger portions of your knowledge, you can think about all the dogs in the universe

and six other kinds of animal as well. You can even think about the entire animal kingdom and have room to think about six more things besides. Chunking illustrates the power of abstraction—using concepts allows you to consider large blocks of knowledge at once, a handy capacity to have when your daily activity demands that you understand and stay abreast of developments within a complex entity such as an organization.

Chunking makes an important contribution to theorizing—it permits us to relate large bodies of knowledge to each other. Remember, a theory is an explanation rooted in the specification of the relationships between a set of concepts (e.g., $E = mc^2$). When the concepts upon which a theory is built are defined at very high levels of abstraction, the theory becomes very general which means that it applies across many situations with few or no limiting conditions. Of course this is part of the danger with theory; by leaving out so many of the details of specific circumstances and meanings as we ascend the heights of abstraction, we can be lulled into thinking that we understand everything. If we assume our knowledge is more general than it is, we may apply it to the wrong situations or be willing to impose our beliefs on others when it is inappropriate or misleading to do so. Therefore, be sure to notice that there is both something gained and something lost when you use abstraction. You gain the ability to think about numerous instances, but you lose the rich detail that the individual cases contain and the depth of knowledge these details describe.

As a theorist, you will want to learn to use abstraction because it permits you to communicate and understand general ideas about complex subjects, such as organizations. This will enable you to see day-to-day issues in a larger perspective that expands your thinking and gives you ready access to accumulated knowledge. But you should also remember that abstract reasoning alone will not provide the important details that you will confront in your role within a specific organization. Applying theory, which is wedded to abstract reasoning, demands that you be able to add critical details back into your formulations after you have analyzed and understood the more abstract aspects of the situation at hand. You will want to develop both concepts and theorizing skills with a broad base of personal experience and then translate your abstractions back into specific understanding.

I believe a great deal of the frustration with organization theory that many students and practitioners report feeling is the result of not recognizing that the application of theory is a creative act. A belief that abstract theory can generate instant solutions to specific problems is naïve. It is equally naïve to reject theory as having little value simply because you have not yet learned how to use it. Theory is better suited to raising important questions at critical moments and reminding you what relevant knowledge is available, than it is to providing ready-made answers to your problems. Use theory as a tool to help you reason through complex situations; do not expect it to guarantee your success.

Multiple Perspectives

Different ways of looking at the world produce different knowledge and thus different perspectives come to be associated with their own concepts and theories. This is the case with

the **multiple perspectives** you will study in this book—modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern. The concepts and theories of a particular perspective offer you distinctive thinking tools with which to craft ideas about organizations and organizing. Depending upon your intentions, you may find that particular perspectives have greater appeal than others for your purpose. The more knowledge you have of multiple perspectives, concepts and theories, the greater will be your capacity to choose a useful approach to dealing with the situations you face in your organization.

British sociologist Gibson Burrell and British organization theorist Gareth Morgan were among the first to draw attention to the multiple perspectives of organization theory in their highly acclaimed book *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis*, published in 1979.² They argued that knowledge is based on different paradigms, each with its own assumptions about the world. Paradigms encourage researchers to study phenomena in different ways.³ However, be sure to notice that paradigm differences are not just academic; they become practical when knowledge is used to create a more desirable reality or better ways of organizing. Beliefs, assumptions and knowledge of the world influence how researchers carry out their research, how leaders design and manage their organizations and how each of us relates to the world and to other people. For example, whether you assume that your organization is best run as a well-oiled machine, a web of meaning, or a broken mirror will influence what you perceive to be the best way of designing your organization and managing its people. As you will see, the three perspectives used in this book draw upon significantly different assumptions about the organizational world and consequently will lead you to think about organizations in different ways (e.g., as machines, cultures or fragmented images) and thus to seek different kinds of knowledge about them.

I am committed to maintaining multiple perspectives in organization theory for a number of reasons. First, today few would disagree that organizations operate in complex, uncertain, and often contradictory situations. Managers and employees are expected to do more with less, to maximize both short-term gain and long-term investment, and be more efficient as well as more humane and ethical. Confronting such a variety of contradictory forces demands the broadest set of concepts and theories that your mind can grasp. Learning to think about organizations using the multiple perspectives presented in this book will help you embrace complexity and uncertainty and their contradictory demands. Second, recent corporate scandals, such as those that occurred at Enron, the FBI, and Parmalat, raise questions about the nature of ethical action and the pressures managers face when trying to act in socially and organizationally responsible ways. Learning to use multiple perspectives can help make you aware of the assumptions and values underlying your theory and practice, which in turn should make you more conscious of your reasons for doing things and better able to understand the reasons behind the actions taken by others. As you begin to grasp the differences between perspectives, you will become aware that what you consider reasonable is defined by the perspective you take. Being able to reflect on your own reasoning processes and compare them to those used by the people around you will develop your ethical awareness. Third, by learning organization theory, by knowing how to theorize, and by understanding how different perspectives influence the way you and others experience, interpret

and shape organizational realities, you will become a more effective member of any organization you join.

In order to compare modernism, symbolic-interpretivism and postmodernism, you will need to examine the assumptions underlying each of these perspectives. A good place to begin is with the important philosophical choices of ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with how you choose to define what is real, whereas epistemology is concerned with how you form knowledge and establish criteria for evaluating it. Thinking about ontology and epistemology is a useful place to begin because these philosophical choices explain basic differences between the perspectives of organization theory. Although they are difficult philosophical issues, by giving ontology and epistemology some attention now, you will begin to learn why different perspectives lead to different ways of theorizing organizations and how modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern perspectives make distinctive contributions to organization theory.

Ontology

Ontology concerns our assumptions about reality. Is there an objective reality out there or is it subjective, existing only in our minds? In ordinary, everyday life, you probably take your assumptions about what exists for granted because you believe you know what the real world is. You get up, drive to work, do your job as a student, manager or administrator, go to meetings, write reports, establish policy etc. You don't question whether these things are real or have an existence independent of you; you know your car exists because you drive it. But does your job exist if you are not there to perform it? Does your report describe what is *really* going on or does it describe only what you *think* is happening? Philosophers sometimes refer to these as existential questions because they attribute existence to one set of things (reality), but not to another (the unreal, metaphysical or fantastical). Depending upon your perspective, you will give some things the status of being real, while you disregard others. These ontological assumptions about whether a particular phenomenon exists or is merely an illusion (e.g., culture, power, control) lead to arguments between those who maintain different perspectives and cause them to set up separate and sometimes conflicting research communities.

Ontology is also concerned with the question of agency—do people have free will and are they wholly responsible for their own actions, or is life predetermined, whether by situations or by God? **Subjectivists** stand at one end of the reality continuum in their belief that something exists only when you experience and give it meaning. At the other end, **objectivists** believe reality exists independently of those who live in it. Seen from the subjectivist point of view, people create and experience realities in different ways because individuals and groups have their own assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions that lead them to do so. Seen from the objectivist point of view, people react to what is happening around them in predictable ways because their behavior is part of the material world in which they live and is determined by causes, just as is the behavior of matter. In between these points of view you can find many combinations of subjectivism and objectivism.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with knowing how you can know. Typical questions asked by those investigating epistemology include: how do humans generate knowledge, what are the criteria by which they discriminate good knowledge from bad (e.g., true from false, valid from invalid, rational from irrational, scientific from pseudoscientific), and how should reality be represented or described? Epistemology is closely related to ontology because the answers to these questions depend on, and in turn help to forge, ontological assumptions about the nature of reality.

Table 1.2 summarizes the key ontological and epistemological differences of the modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern perspectives and their implications for organization theory.

Positivist epistemology assumes you can discover what truly happens in organizations through the categorization and scientific measurement of the behavior of people and systems. Positivists also assume that language mirrors reality, that is, reality and its objects can be described using language without any loss of meaning or inherent bias.⁴ For positivists, good knowledge is generated by developing hypotheses and propositions, gathering and analyzing data, and then testing the hypotheses and propositions against the external reality represented by their data to see if they are correct. In this way, modernists can develop general theories explaining many different aspects of one overarching reality, and make predictions about the future.

Positivist epistemology is based on foundational principals that celebrate the values of reason, truth and validity. Positivist organization theorists study organizations as objective entities and are attracted to methods adapted from the physical or hard sciences. They gather data using surveys and laboratory or field experiments relying upon measures of behavior that their assumptions lead them to regard as objective. Based on statistical analysis of the data collected using these methods, they derive theoretical models that they believe provide factual explanations of how organizations operate.

Antipositivist or **interpretive** epistemology assumes that knowledge can only be created and understood from the point of view of the individuals who live and work in a particular culture or organization. Interpretivists assume that each of us acts in situations and makes sense of what is happening based on our experience of that situation and the memories and expectations we bring to it. This means that there may be many different understandings and interpretations of reality and interpretive epistemology leads us to use methods designed to access the meanings made by others and describe how they come to make those meanings. However, we know that our understanding of others is filtered through our own experiences, and therefore we can never be objective about the interpretations made by others.

What interpretivists believe they can do is work alongside others as they create their realities and, by studying their interpretations and interactions in particular situations, develop intersubjective awareness of and appreciation for the meanings produced. This stance is what turns a researcher into an interpreter, bridging meaning between the researcher's academic experiences and the experiences of organizational members. Both of these experiences are subjective, and bias is controlled (but never eliminated) through

Table 1.2 Summary of the three perspectives of organization theory

Modernism		Symbolic interpretivism		Postmodernism	
Ontology Objectivism—belief in an objective, external reality whose existence is independent of our knowledge of it	Ontology Subjectivism—the belief that we cannot know an external or objective existence apart from our subjective awareness of it; that which exists is that which we agree exists	Ontology Postmodernism—the belief that the world appears through language and is situated in discourse; what is spoken of exists, therefore everything that exists is a text to be read or performed			
Epistemology Positivism—we discover Truth through valid conceptualization and reliable measurement that allows us to test knowledge against an objective world; knowledge accumulates, allowing humans to progress and evolve	Epistemology Interpretivism—all knowledge is relative to the knower and can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are directly involved; truth is socially constructed via multiple interpretations of the objects of knowledge thereby constructed and therefore shifts and changes through time	Epistemology Postmodernism—knowledge cannot be an accurate account of Truth because meanings cannot be fixed; there is no independent reality; there are no facts, only interpretations; knowledge is a power play			
Organizations are Objectively real entities operating in a real world. When well-designed and managed they are systems of decision and action driven by norms of rationality, efficiency and effectiveness for stated purposes	Organizations are Continually constructed and reconstructed by their members through symbolically mediated interaction. Organizations are socially constructed realities where meanings promote and are promoted by understanding of the self and others that occurs within the organizational context	Organizations are Sites for enacting power relations, oppression, irrationality, communicative distortion—or arenas of fun and playful irony. Organizations are texts produced by and in language; we can rewrite them so as to emancipate ourselves from human folly and degradation			
Focus of Organization Theory Finding universal laws, methods and techniques of organization and control; favors rational structures, rules, standardized procedures and routine practices	Focus of Organization Theory Describing how people give meaning and order to their experience within specific contexts, through interpretive and symbolic acts, forms and processes	Focus of Organization Theory Deconstructing organizational texts; destabilizing managerial ideologies and modernist modes of organizing and theorizing; revealing marginalized and oppressed viewpoints; encouraging reflexive and inclusive forms of theorizing and organizing			

rigorous training in self-reflection. Such training is designed to teach you to separate your interpretations from those of the people you study. This method allows you to describe how meaning was made in particular situations and among particular people and to offer your understanding for others who were not there to witness what you experienced.

Taking an interpretive epistemological stance helps you to become sensitive to how people make meaning to the point where, while you will never be able to fully understand or predict the meanings others will make, you can develop your intuitive capacity to anticipate the range of meanings that are likely to emerge in given circumstances by specific people with whom you share adequate intersubjective understanding. Perhaps most importantly, your growing appreciation for the limits of understanding will prevent you from ever claiming to fully know another's meaning and will open you to deep listening.

Comparing Modern, Symbolic and Postmodern Perspectives

You might think of ontology and epistemology as commitments you make to your preferred genre of organization theory. To take a modernist perspective, you must commit to limiting what you count as knowledge to what you can know through your five senses. Of course modernists augment their five senses with sense-enhancing devices (e.g., microscope, telescope), but what counts as data is what is collected by the eyes, ears, nose, tongue or skin. Modernists claim that 'I saw (heard, smelled, tasted or touched) my data, and you can confirm them for yourself by replicating my procedures'.

Symbolic-interpretivists are willing to extend the definition of empirical reality to include forms of experience that lie outside the reach of the five senses, as do emotion and intuition. As a result of this subjectivity, their findings cannot be easily replicated by others. The commitment these researchers make is to be true to their personal experience and to honor the accounts and explanations made by others. What is more, symbolic-interpretivists focus on meaning and understanding as it occurs in particular contexts; consequently their findings should not be generalized beyond the context in which they were produced. Modernists find this problematic—can we really call what we create knowledge if we are unable to replicate studies or apply their findings to other organizations? As opposed to generalizability, symbolic-interpretivists sometimes use verisimilitude (the resonance of one's own experience with the experiences of others) as the basis for claiming they have made a contribution to understanding.

Because of the differences in their assumptions, modernist and symbolic-interpretive researchers endlessly debate methodology. For instance, modernists say subjectivity undermines scientific rigor, while symbolic-interpretivists say it cannot be avoided and, indeed, is required if we are to study meaning. Modernists typically believe that subjective understandings introduce bias, and bias is precisely what science seeks to eradicate in pursuit of the rational ideals of modernism. Lurking behind these epistemological positions is an irresolvable debate between their differing ontologies that permit symbolic-interpretivists to investigate meaning as a subjective phenomenon, while modernists are precluded by their ontological assumption of objectivity from allowing the subjective to enter their

science. As you will see in the following chapters, these differences in assumptions mean that modernist and symbolic-interpretive organization theorists define organizational concepts differently and use different research methods that often cause them to disagree rather violently with one another.

Turning to postmodern perspectives, there is even more trouble to be found. Postmodernism diverges from the other two perspectives in its unwillingness to seek Truth (spelled with a capital T to indicate the idea of truth in any final or irrefutable sense), or to make permanent ontological or epistemological commitments such as those that give rise to modernist forms of scientific endeavor or to symbolic-interpretive descriptions of meaning and human meaning making activity. Seen from these other perspectives, postmodernists seem to flit between philosophical positions. They often refuse to take even a temporary philosophical stand because they believe that doing so privileges some forms of knowledge over others and this violates postmodern ethics.

Many postmodernists trace the ethical foundations of postmodernism to the French poststructural philosophers, especially to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. For example, Foucault argued that, since knowledge is power, when anyone privileges particular forms of knowledge, they push other forms to the margins where they are likely to be ignored.⁵ Derrida observed that this is because modern thought is binary and binary thinking leads us to center our attention on one element of a pair while ignoring or denigrating its opposite or other (e.g., true/false, nature/culture, reality/representation). Therefore the development and use of knowledge are always power plays that must be resisted for the sake of the powerless. Many postmodernists commit themselves to uncovering and challenging all forms of power (including knowledge) in order to expose the sources of domination that are so easily taken for granted. They do so by decrying the privileged and bringing those people and ideas relegated to the margins out of the shadow of their repression. (If this and other statements about postmodernism confuse you, don't worry, you will find a more elaborate introduction to postmodernism in Chapter 2 and a more thorough treatment of power in Chapter 8.)

The other two perspectives have not ignored the challenge laid down by postmodernists. First, symbolic-interpretivists, and more recently modernists, have tried to respond to this challenge within their own systems of belief and commitment. The result has been some movement toward greater self-consciousness about the assumptions each perspective makes, and how these commitments apply to the practice of social science and the theories that result from their application. For example, postmodernists have critiqued cultural anthropologists (both modernist and symbolic-interpretive) for their co-optation by Western governments to aid in the subordination of indigenous and aboriginal cultures. Postmodernists argued that cultural anthropologists, seduced by the allure of government grants and a romantic vision of helping less advanced cultures progress toward the ideals of Western civilization, conspired in the colonization of non-Western peoples to the detriment if not the destruction of many native cultures. The response by Western anthropologists was to give voice to the members of the cultures they studied by inviting them to help interpret the data collected about them, and in some cases to write cultural reports themselves. Aboriginal reports are, of course, no freer of self-interest than any other, but by juxtaposing reports from many perspectives you can begin to learn about the range

of biases that appear in all data. Watch the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to get a taste of aboriginal self-reporting on the injustices experienced by native Australians when European colonizers attempted to Westernize their culture.

As you can see, the issues of ontology and epistemology are complex and are understood differently when viewed from within each perspective. To get a feel for how different these perspectives can be, take the well-known question: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? To the modernist the answer is yes because the tree and sound are real and can be measured; therefore it doesn't matter whether anyone is there to experience the tree falling or not—knowledge of what happens when a tree falls generalizes to all falling trees. To the symbolic-interpretivist there is no way of knowing the answer to this question because there is no one to experience the tree falling. Although a symbolic-interpretivist could study how different people make sense of the question, if no one is present when the tree falls then there is no meaning to address apart from that of the rhetorical move of asking a hypothetical question. To a postmodernist the answer is likely to be a set of entirely different questions: Who has the right to ask or answer this question? Whose interests have been marginalized and violated in the process?

Returning to our prior discussion of concepts, you should now be ready to refine your understanding of a concept by applying the three perspectives. Notice that modernists emphasize the representative aspect of concepts—concepts align with objects in the real world (e.g., the concept of dog represents real dogs). Symbolic-interpretivists emphasize the agreement among the people of one culture to call things by the same names (e.g., the English word *dog* versus the French *chien*), pointing out that you construct concepts in the context of intersubjective meanings and vocabularies shared with other members of your culture. Postmodernists emphasize the ever-changing relationship between concepts. For the postmodernist all words, including concepts, are defined in relation to other words (dog versus cat, mouse, house, life) rather than in relation to objects in the real world; no word's meaning can be fully or finally determined because each use brings a word into relationship with a different set of other words and this continually changing juxtapositioning causes its meaning to endlessly shift.

It is important to understand the differences in the applications of the perspectives because these differences are not only crucial to how theory is created but also to the way organizing is practiced. If you take the objectivist stance that an organization is a formal structure with an internal order, a set of natural laws governing its operation, and roles that must be carried out in a deterministic manner by organizational members, you will manage your organization and act differently toward it and others within it than if you adopt either the subjectivist stance or the postmodern perspective. Similarly, if you take the subjectivist stance, that organizations have no objective structure but are continually constructed and maintained by people as they try to make sense of what is going on, you will manage your organization differently than if you assume the postmodern perspective and thereby maintain skepticism toward the idea that knowledge is anything more than a ploy to gain power over others. It is important to know what your underlying assumptions are when you apply your theories because each set of ontological and epistemological

assumptions will exercise a different influence on the way you design and manage your organization.

Plan of the Book

Part I of the book describes the approach I will use to help you learn organization theory and develop your capacity to theorize. Chapter 1 has introduced you to several core ideas—theory, theorizing, concepts and abstraction—and to the three perspectives that form the framework of this book—modern, symbolic-interpretive, and postmodern. Chapter 2 presents a historical account of the economists, sociologists and classical management scholars whose work inspired the first organization theorists and to some of the theories that subsequently shaped the three perspectives of organization theory.

Part II of the book will present you with the core concepts that contemporary organization theorists use to explain, understand and theorize organizations. In these chapters you will learn to look at organizations as constituents of a larger environment (Chapter 3); as social structures ordering the activities of their members (Chapter 4); as technologies for producing goods and services for society (Chapter 5); as cultures that produce and are produced by meanings that form the symbolic world of the organization (Chapter 6); as physical structures that support and constrain both activity and meaning (Chapter 7); and as arenas within which power relations express themselves through organizational politics, conflict and control (Chapter 8). These core concepts are related in numerous ways, yet each will contribute something unique to your understanding of organizations and organizing. As you read and reread these chapters, strive to develop your appreciation for both the similarities and differences between the concepts because this will develop your imagination for theorizing.

In addition to providing exposure to the core concepts of organization theory, Part II will present several different theories of organization that were built using the core concepts. Within each chapter these theories will be presented in historical order; in most cases this means beginning with modern and proceeding to symbolic-interpretive and postmodern perspectives, although organizational culture is an exception in that symbolic-interpretivists were complicit with modernists in introducing this concept into organization theory. This format should help you to experience organization theory as an unfolding series of challenges and disagreements among theorists and their ideas about and different perspectives on organizations and organizing.

The theories I am going to present will not only give you exposure to the various types of explanation, understanding and appreciation offered by organization theory, they will also provide a means to describe some of the skills and practices organization theorists use. In discussing how theorists produce theory, I mean to encourage you to become more actively theoretical in your approach to organizations and in your management practices. In this regard, Part III will show you how organization theorists sometimes combine concepts, theories and perspectives to analyze and recommend action on practical

issues and problems such as organizational design, organizational change, knowledge management and organizational learning (Chapter 9). The final chapter will introduce you to ideas that lie on the horizon for organization theory: critical realism, network theory, organizational aesthetics, complexity theory and organizational identity (Chapter 10). Thus Part III will show you some of the tricks of the trade practiced by organization theorists.

A Conceptual Model of Organization

Throughout this book I will provide many conceptual models such as you see in Figure 1.2. These models visually represent theories as sets of concepts and their relationships. Organization theorists use them to make abstractions seem more tangible. Figure 1.2, for example, is a visual way of communicating my definition of organizations as technologies, social structures, cultures and physical structures that exist within and respond to an environment. The grey tint over the entire model indicates that all of these elements of organizing are colored by relations of power.

Diagrams such as Figure 1.2 can help you to remember a great deal about the theories you will be studying. Giving these diagrams close attention will often reveal aspects of organization theory that are subtle but important. For example, let the interconnections of the four small circles in Figure 1.2 remind you that none of these concepts or the theories and perspectives associated with them is complete in itself; each shares some aspects with the others and it is the combination of these different ways of knowing that will allow you to produce rich and complex explanations and descriptions of organization, or to

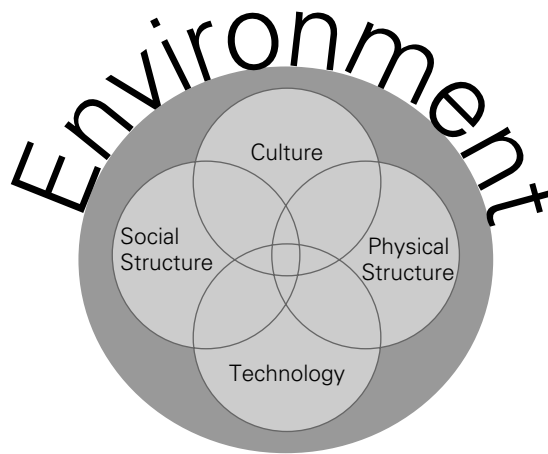


Figure 1.2 A model for the concept of organization

The five intersecting circles of this model represent the organization as five inter-related phenomena conceptualized as shown. Power, a sixth core concept, is symbolized by the grey tint that infuses the other circles. These six concepts will be examined in depth in Part II of the book.

challenge theories offered by others. Now imagine that each of the circles is a sphere spinning on its axis and rotating around the others. Let this image remind you that these core concepts are dynamic, mutually reactive parts of an organization interacting with and within an environment. Then focus on the intersections of the circles and the gray tint infusing them all. Let these features of the model remind you that any conceptual distinction can be regarded as insupportable, that from some other perspective your distinctions will break down and blend into each other.

I should warn you that, as you move toward understanding each core concept, there will be times when you get caught in the intersections and become confused as to which concept, theory or perspective you are using. Expect this. Try not to feel discouraged when it happens because this is part of the process of becoming knowledgeable about organization theory. Trust that out of your confusion new possibilities for theorizing, designing and managing organizations will emerge in ways that you would never have imagined before you studied organization theory.

SUMMARY

A theory attempts to explain (modernist), describe so as to produce understanding and appreciation of (symbolic-interpretive), criticize or create (postmodernist) a segment of reality. Which of these purposes you believe theory serves depends on your ontological and epistemological assumptions. The particular focus of a theory is called its phenomenon of interest. In organization theory the primary phenomenon of interest is the organization. A theory consists of a set of concepts and the relationships that tie them together into an explanation (or an understanding, critique or creation) of the phenomenon of interest.

Because of the complexity and pluralism of organizations, managers who make sense of and use multiple perspectives are better able to bring their knowledge of organization theory to bear on the wide range of analyses, decisions and plans their organizations make each and every day. This book is built upon the framework of multiple perspectives, and in particular, modern, symbolic-interpretive, and postmodern perspectives will structure our discussion. Studying organization theory from multiple perspectives will help you to enlarge your knowledge base, master a wide range of skills and see situations in different ways—all of which are crucial for understanding, analyzing and managing the complexities of organizational life.

The modernist perspective focuses on the organization as an independent objective entity and takes a positivist approach to generating knowledge. Modernist organization theorists focus on how to increase efficiency, effectiveness and other objective indicators of performance through the application of theories relating to structure and control. The symbolic-interpretive perspective focuses on the organization as a community sustained by human relationships and uses a predominantly subjectivist ontology and an interpretive epistemology. Instead of treating organizations as objects to be measured and analyzed (modernist perspective), symbolic-interpretivists treat them as webs of meanings that are jointly created, appreciated and communicated. Symbolic-interpretive organization theory explores how meanings are created and realities (note the plural) made sensible to those who participate in sustaining them.

Meanwhile postmodernism will generate healthy skepticism toward any dominant theory and will license you and others to try something completely different. The postmodern perspective does all this by expanding the focus of theorizing from the organization per se, to how we speak and write about organizations. Thus one phenomenon postmodern organization theory addresses is theorizing itself: how what you may perceive as stable or objective elements of

organizations and organization theory (structure, technology, culture, control, etc.) are but the outcomes of linguistic convention and discursive practice. As such, postmodernism always makes you aware that theories are open to revision and invites you to ask who supports them and why. You should recognize, however, that most postmodernists would object to being categorized as they are in Figure 1.1 and Table 1.2. Remember, postmodernism challenges categories, seeking to undermine them by blurring their boundaries and exposing the motivations that produced or maintain them. In the case of Figure 1.1, for instance, a postmodernist would probably argue that this typology objectifies organization theory and theorizing in ways that reproduce and legitimize seeing the field as constructed of modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern perspectives, when other perspectives might be promoted at the same time or instead of these (some others will be discussed in Chapter 10).

I believe that the best theories are those that you have found or invented to match your own experience of organization. In this book you will learn about the theories of organizations and organizing that others have developed and the skills they used to formulate them. This will give you a foundation for your own theorizing. You can use the already formulated theories as they stand, if this proves useful to your purposes, or as inspiration for your own theory-building efforts, but in either case, using organization theory will require both the mastery of existing theories and personal development of the skills of theorizing, analysis, interpretation and critique. Just remember: when you want to apply your abstract reasoning to concrete situations you will need to reverse the process of abstraction and that will require you to perform a creative act.

Finally, you have your own reasons for studying organization theory. Mine are that organization theory broadens my appreciation of organizations and the world in general and opens my mind to new ideas and possibilities for change and transformation. I am constantly renewed by my work in this field and find that the ideas it has given me promote an increased ability to develop new concepts and theories and enhance my ability to learn. Although it may hold other meanings and possibilities for you, I hope that my enthusiasm, which is built on my own particular needs, values and experiences, will inspire you to explore and learn to use organization theory in ways that enhance your life and career.

KEY TERMS

phenomenon of interest
theory
concepts
abstraction
chunking
multiple perspectives
modern
symbolic-interpretive

postmodern
ontology
objectivist
subjectivist
epistemology
positivist
interpretive

ENDNOTES

1. See Miller (1956).
2. The multiple perspectives approach to organization theory has been employed by a variety of researchers. One of the earliest and most influential of these was American political scientist Graham Allison (1971), who analyzed the Cuban Missile Crisis using several different theoretical perspectives. John

Hassard (1988, 1991; Hassard and Pym 1990) has been particularly active in promoting Burrell and Morgan's (1979) framework. W. Richard Scott (1992) presented rational, natural, and open system views of organizations, while Joanne Martin (1992) built her analysis of organizational culture theory around a multiple perspective

- approach including integration, differentiation, and fragmentation perspectives.
3. This assumption is important because theorists use language to create and communicate their theories and if language did not align with reality then it would be impossible to lay claim to positive knowledge.
 4. See Schneider (1993) for further discussion and analysis of this ongoing debate.
 5. Foucault (1977).

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WORK CITED IN FIGURE 1.1 IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER BY PERSPECTIVE

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